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ABSTRACT

Labor unions have provided English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) instruction in the workplace since the early 1900s, to serve a growing immigrant workforce. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, an increase in immigrant population, decline in manufacturing jobs, new technology, and work restructuring brought a new urgency to union-sponsored worker education, primarily to provide workers with access to training. The need for communication skills, problem-solving skills, and knowledge of workplace organization for the high-performance workplace has recently emerged as a new need. Programs usually involve a partnership of unions, businesses, and educational entities. These may include union consortia, joint union-company partnership funds, or individual unions forming partnerships with employers and educators. Workplace ESL instruction and curricula for union programs incorporate the range of approaches and techniques found in many adult ESL programs. While the major focus is on job-related language skills, the programs may also teach general life skills, worker rights and responsibilities, problem-solving and critical thinking, and health safety. Contains 11 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Project in Adult Immigrant Education

National Clearinghouse for ESL
Literacy Education

Union-Sponsored Workplace ESL Instruction

By Susan Rosenblum

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Project in Adult Immigrant Education PAIE
National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Union-Sponsored Workplace ESL Instruction

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Labor unions have historically been at the forefront of movements in the United States to link education and work. Since the early 1900s, when unions with large immigrant populations—such as the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union in New York—began offering night classes in English and citizenship, using teachers from the New York City Board of Education and union staff, unions have operated educational programs to meet workers' diverse needs. In 1994 the author interviewed several providers of union-sponsored workplace English as a second language (ESL) instructional programs. Based on these interviews and a review of current literature, this digest explores the history of union-sponsored workplace ESL instruction; discusses some models for program delivery; and briefly describes curricula and program goals.

The History of Union-Sponsored ESL Instruction

In the early 1900s, in response to the demand for English classes from a growing immigrant workforce, unions organized evening classes. Workers attended to become citizens and to advocate for the eight-hour day, labor's right to strike, and laws strengthening safety conditions in the workplace. While ESL was the core of the programs, courses in public speaking, economics, literature, history, and civics were also provided. These classes were integrated with the overall union agenda of meeting the practical needs of members to know English so they could participate in developing the union and protect themselves in the workplace.

Over the next sixty years, classes in citizenship, ESL, and technical skills continued to be offered in union halls across the nation. Then, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, several factors including an increase in immigrant population, a decline in manufacturing jobs, and a combination of new technology and work restructuring brought a new urgency to union-sponsored worker education. When dislocated workers from auto, steel, and other manufacturing industries sought retraining under federally supported programs such as the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) or Trade Adjustment Assistance Act (TAA), their teachers identified the need for basic skills instruction in reading, writing, and math before workers could access technological training to qualify for positions in the new, increasingly computerized workplace.

Workers with limited English proficiency now face a different barrier to retraining and employment. They lack the language to access training. Even entry level positions are demanding high-level English language and literacy skills; in New York, union educators report that warehouse jobs require workers to read and write English well for shipping and delivery work.

Many manufacturing companies have begun to shift to the "high performance workplace"—where teamwork, problem solving, and full involvement of the workforce are employed to improve the quality of work (Pratt, 1995). This means that teaching language and basic skills is not enough; communication skills, problem-solving skills, and knowledge of workplace organization for the high performance workplace must also be taught.

Union-Sponsored Program Models

Like the majority of workplace instructional programs, union-sponsored programs generally involve a partnership of unions, businesses, and educational entities to provide the services. Union consortia, joint union/employer-supported programs, and individual union/company-funded programs are examples of three program-delivery models forged from partnerships.

Union Consortia

Several unions may unite to form a consortium to offer so-called "worker education" programs to their members. These consortia provide ESL classes as part of ongoing adult education programs linked to community development and union organization.

One such entity is the New York Consortium for Worker Education (CWE) (Collins, Balmuth, & Jean, 1989). In 1985 the educational director of the Teamsters Local 237 in New York City founded the CWE and organized New York labor unions to lobby the state legislature to introduce line-item funding in the state budget for worker education programs. Today, about 22 unions participate in the CWE, serving over 10,000 union members and their families in work-related basic skills, ESL, and skills training programs.

Sometimes the state or local AFL-CIO spearheads the instructional programs. In California, the state with the largest immigrant population in the country, citizenship and ESL classes are offered to recent immigrants through the Los Angeles County's Federation of Labor's Labor Immigrant Assistance Project. In Wisconsin, the AFL-CIO contracts directly with the state vocational and technical schools to offer basic skills and ESL instruction to the union members at local union halls and at the worksites (Sarmiento & Kay, 1990).

Joint Union/Company Partnership Funds

Many unions have negotiated basic skills and ESL training through collective bargaining agreements with employers. Union dues and matching funds from employers provide health, education, and welfare benefits for workers. Examples of unions with these negotiated educational benefits include the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in New York City; the United Auto Workers (UAW); the United Steelworkers of America; and the Communications Workers of America. To extend the educational benefits of union membership, companies and unions are increasingly sponsoring programs where spouses and other family members are eligible to participate. UAW, offering workplace education programs through a joint fund with GM, Ford, and Chrysler, requires that recruitment include reaching out to spouses.

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These joint union/company funds were originally targeted for tuition reimbursement for workers enrolled in classes at local community colleges and other educational institutions. Increasingly, the monies support basic skills and ESL classes offered at the workplace, especially in industries where entry level workers lack the skills and language necessary to access the tuition reimbursement program (Alamprese & Kay, 1993).

Individual Unions Forming Partnerships with Employers and Educators

Some individual unions provide workplace instruction in partnership with businesses and educational institutions. Many of these programs have been funded, at least in part, through federal initiatives such as the National Workplace Literacy Program of the U.S. Department of Education. An example of one such program with strong union involvement is the Worker Education Program in Chicago. In this collaboration, the educational partner, Northeastern Illinois University Teachers Center, is the recipient of the federal monies. However, the education staff has offices at the union hall of the labor partner, the Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees (UNITE!). Many of the classes are held at the union hall, and all partner companies are selected in consultation with the union.

Curricula and Goals

Workplace ESL instruction and curricula for union programs incorporate the range of approaches and techniques found in many adult ESL programs. Like adult education programs anywhere, most workplace ESL programs use activities from many different approaches—from competency-based and grammar-based approaches to the more participatory approaches such as whole language, language experience, and learner writing and publishing. [See Peyton and Crandall, 1995, for a discussion of approaches and philosophies in adult ESL instruction.] For example, at a New York City electronics factory where workers were primarily Spanish-speaking women represented by the UAW, learners participated in an oral history project and practiced reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Learners taped interviews with coworkers, listened to the tapes in class, and discussed issues from the interviews. Then they wrote introductions to the interviews and responded in writing to what coworkers had said in their interviews. Finally, learners compiled their work on this project and published an illustrated book and the tapes documenting their work and union experience in the factory (Gothowitz, 1987).

Although most workplace ESL programs teach job-related English so workers can perform their jobs competently and increase productivity, unions also teach what learners want to know and what unions want their members to know. Many programs include instruction in general life skills as well as job-specific instruction, and offer worker-centered education where worker rights as well as worker responsibilities are taught (Auerbach & Wallerstein, 1987; Collins, Balmuth, & Jean, 1989; Sarmiento & Kay, 1990). Further, especially in industries moving to the high performance workplace, managers and unions alike are recognizing the importance of developing problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Nash & Uvin, 1993; Pratt, 1995).

Finally, as a quality of life issue and as part of their instruction about workplace rights, health and safety instruction is stressed in union-sponsored programs. Immigrant workers are more likely to hold low-paying and hazardous jobs. And, according to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (1994), a study reported that Spanish-speaking workers suffered job injuries 80 percent more often than other workers. Health and safety instructional materials used by union programs include publications by Auerbach and Wallerstein, 1987; Gude, 1993; and Szudy and Arroyo, 1994.

Conclusion

Labor unions have provided ESL instruction at the workplace since the early days of the century. Today, through partnerships with one another, with educators, and with employers, many unions are offering ESL instruction to assure that immigrant workers are prepared to face the challenges of today's workplace and can secure and maintain employment at a living wage.

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